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Ryerson Canadian History Readers
(Selkirk, Thomas D.)

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LORD SELKIRK

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PRICE 10 CENTS

THE RYERSON PRESS
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LORD SELKIRK

THOSE who have read *Ivanhoe* and *Kenilworth* are possibly not aware that the author had at least two ties binding him to Canada. A brother of Sir Walter Scott lived for some years at Niagara, the first capital of Upper Canada, and some who knew him said that he provided many of the plots for the novels which his brother Walter later wrote. Sir Walter Scott also knew the Earl of Selkirk in his boyhood, and in his diary frequently refers to him as one who "doffed the world aside and bid it pass!" Selkirk even asked Scott to join his venture, but the novelist was then forging fast ahead, and declined to forsake his pen. He was, however, greatly interested in Selkirk's spacious dreams.

Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk, was born in June, 1771, at the family seat, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland. He was the fifth son of the Earl of Selkirk. It is said that when Thomas was seven years old, his home was invaded by Captain Paul Jones, of the

New England States. The Captain had crossed the ocean in his ship, the *Ranger,* and harried the west coast of Great Britain. He worked north to the Scottish coast, which he knew well, as he had been born and bred in Kirkcudbrightshire. Coming to the home of the Selkirks, it was his intention to capture the head of the family. But by good fortune the Earl was away from home. This was during the American Revolution of 1776. Douglas was brought up amongst historic surroundings, and received a good education. He met at his home many of the outstanding men at that time; men like Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns. At the age of fifteen he went to the University of Edinburgh, where he spent the next four years. While there he interested himself in the work of the various literary societies, and became a member of "The Club." It was here, too, that he formed a very intimate friendship with Sir Walter Scott, the great novelist.



THE FIGHT AT SEVEN OAKS

AS IF BITTER COLD, HUNGER, SICKNESS AND LONELINESS WERE NOT ENOUGH, THE SELKIRK SETTLERS FOUND THEMSELVES IN THE THICK OF THE OLD ENMITY BETWEEN THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY AND THE NOR'-WESTERS. LOOKING BACK, THE FIGHT AT SEVEN OAKS APPEARS SMALL ENOUGH, BUT IT WAS IMPORTANT IN RESULTS, AND DESERVES TO BE REMEMBERED AS ONE OF THE HISTORIC PLACES OF THE WEST.

Thomas Douglas showed himself to be a young man of energy and resourcefulness. After leaving the university he toured Europe, visiting especially France and Italy. While in Italy he studied the agriculture of that country, and wrote a pamphlet on it. France at this time was in the throes of the Revolution, and it was during this period, in company with many other young Britishers, that Douglas received the impressions that were no doubt a great factor in determining his later efforts at empire-building. His father died in 1799, and Thomas Douglas succeeded to the title as Earl of Selkirk, his four brothers having died before their father. There was much distress in Scotland at the time, the raising of sheep having driven many men from the farm, leaving them unemployed. Land was scarce, and people were starving, but here in Canada, lands were idle because of the lack of people to work them.

Lord Selkirk, having a good education,

possessing wealth and influence, turned his thoughts towards relieving the distress in his beloved country. He dreamed of noble projects. He laid plans for a systematic scheme of emigration, having studied the subject very carefully, and mastered the details. In his reading he came upon the romantic adventures of Alexander Mackenzie and was fascinated by them. These you will read about for yourself in another book of this series. We have all been thrilled with the love of adventure, of going out into the unknown, of looking around the corner to see what new thing would present itself, so that we can imagine how Selkirk was challenged by the reading of Mackenzie's exploits. Selkirk was a young man eighteen years of age when Mackenzie started out on his travels.

In this way Selkirk became interested in Canada, and particularly in the Red River valley, which he believed offered the advantage of good, fertile soil, and the opportu-

nity of securing it free of charge. The scheme which he prepared for the emigration of his Highlanders, was not only a plan for the relief of distress amongst them, but also for the broadening of the empire. Of this he said: "Now it is our duty to befriend this people. Let them be led abroad to new possessions. Let us direct their emigration; give them homes under our own flag, and they will strengthen the empire. No tract of land remains unoccupied on the seacoast of the British America, except barren and frozen deserts. To find sufficient extent of good soil in a temperate climate, we must go far inland. This inconvenience, however, is not an insurmountable obstacle to the prosperity of a colony; and appears to be amply compensated for by other advantages that are to be found in some remote parts of British territory. At the western extremity of Canada, upon the waters which fall into Lake Winnipeg, and uniting with the great river of Port Nelson, discharge



LORD SELKIRK NAMING THE PARISH OF KILDONAN

"THE PARISH SHALL BE KILDONAN; HERE YOU SHALL BUILD YOUR CHURCH, AND THAT LOT IS FOR A SCHOOL."

themselves into Hudson Bay, is a fertile country, which the Indian traders represent as such, and of climate far more temperate than the shores of the Atlantic, under the same parallel, and not more severe than Germany or Poland. Here, therefore, the colonists may, with a moderate exertion of industry, be certain of a comfortable subsistence, and they may also raise some valuable objects of exportation."

This is a remarkable statement for that time (1802), because the average person looked upon the Canadian North West as "Polar Regions." Lord Selkirk made another striking prophecy. "It is a very moderate calculation to say that if these regions were occupied by an industrious population, they might afford ample means of subsistence for thirty millions of British subjects." How true this has become! Manitoba is now producing millions of bushels of wheat yearly, besides other products; while Winnipeg is one of the greatest

wheat markets in the world, and the three prairie provinces are the granary of the empire.

Everyone seemed to oppose Lord Selkirk's emigration scheme, and the government actually forbade him to form a colony in what is now Manitoba. The prejudices of the British people were strongly against emigration, as Britain was engaged in a great war, and this project, they declared, would weaken her supply of men. Then, too, the Highland Society strenuously opposed the removal of Highlanders from their lands to the New World.

Selkirk's first attempt to establish a Scottish settlement was in Prince Edward Island. Eight hundred persons settled there, and experienced the usual difficulties and hardships of colonists. Many, however, became very prosperous farmers, and to-day thousands on the Island trace their descent from these Selkirk settlers. Lord Selkirk visited Prince Edward Island himself, and travelled

through Eastern Canada and the United States. He then brought more settlers to Eastern Canada, but unfortunately these colonists were not so successful. In 1803 he visited Montreal, and was shown great hospitality by the "Beaver Club." This was an organization which limited its membership to those who dealt in furs. Every meeting meant a banquet, and each club-man wore a gold medal on which was engraved the motto, *Fortitude in Distress.* Dishes were served which smacked of the prairie and forest. After the toasts had been drunk, the jovial party knelt on the floor for a final ceremony. With poker or tongs, or whatever else was at hand, they imitated paddlers in action, and a chorus of lusty voices joined in a burst of song! One can imagine Selkirk asking eager questions of the "Beavers," for nothing escaped his keen observation.

When thirty-six years of age Selkirk married a Miss Jane Colville, whose family were

influential people, and connected with the Hudson's Bay Company. Lady Selkirk was a very practical woman, and helped her husband a great deal with his emigration schemes. Her sympathy and co-operation were invaluable. The North West Company, a rival fur-trading organization, bitterly opposed Selkirk's land settlement idea. They believed that he would not be able to carry his plan through, for to them it appeared to be the mad act of an impractical dreamer. In 1808, Selkirk, having proved the validity of the Hudson's Bay charter, bought a large amount of stock in the Company, and became a Director. He tried to persuade the Company to colonize with him, but they refused. Selkirk then proposed that if they would give the land, he would people this within a given period, at his own expense, foster the early efforts of the settlers, and appease the claims of the Indian tribes that inhabited the territory.

In 1811, the Hudson's Bay Company

gave him 116,000 square miles of land, covering what is now Manitoba and part of the states of Minnesota and North Dakota. You will understand that at this date the boundary line in the North West was not yet fixed between Canada and the United States. Selkirk's friends and acquaintances did not know what to think of this scheme. Some thought it absurd. One man meeting him in London said: "If you are bent on doing something futile, why don't you sow tares at home, in order to reap wheat; or plough up the desert of Sahara, which is nearer?" However, Selkirk was determined, and immediately advertised for settlers. Here is the gist of his prospectus.

"Land was to be given away free, or sold for a nominal sum. To the poor, transportation would cost nothing; others would have to pay according to their means. No one would be debarred on account of their religion, and all creeds were to be treated alike."

Selkirk met with a good deal of opposition, for in the meantime the North West Company agents had been very busy, trying to dissuade the people from going. A pamphlet was written and published broadcast, containing the following words: "Even if they escape from the scalping knife, they will be subject to constant alarm and terror. Their habitations, their crops, their cattle will be destroyed, and they will find it impossible to live in the country."

The Selkirk party of about ninety people was finally gathered together, however, and late in July, 1811, the Hudson's Bay Company ships, *Prince of Wales* and *Eddystone*, with the transport *Edward and Ann*, were ready for the trip. The voyage took sixty-one days, a very lengthy period, even for those days. The ships were in poor condition, badly manned and ill-equipped, and much stormy weather was encountered. On September 24th they landed at York Factory, near Fort Nelson. Winter was fast

approaching, and it was too late to proceed to their final destination. One can imagine what their thoughts must have been! Strangers in a strange land, without home or shelter, yet they came of a race that nothing daunts. This brave little party, men, women and children, (numbering in all, one hundred and five) landed on the inhospitable shores of Hudson Bay, unpopulated by civilized creatures, with the exception of the Fur Traders at their scattered posts, Indians and half-breeds. They were, however, undaunted by the prospect before them. They knew that they had to travel several hundred miles before they could reach their "Land of Promise," a journey full of peril, not only from wild beasts, but even worse, surprise attacks from hostile Indians.

Then, too, they had to look forward to the intense cold of the northern winter, and prepare themselves for its severity as quickly as possible. Haste was imperative! There was no accommodation for them at York

Factory, and log houses had to be built. Macdonnell, Selkirk's agent, took charge of this work, and superintended the building of winter quarters. These were completed by October 26th. The men were awkward with the axe, and equally unskilled with the rifle. They were all kept busy enough during the winter, hunting deer and partridges for food, and cutting firewood. The time passed without serious mishap. Towards spring they had to build large, flat boats, or *bateaux*, to convey themselves, their families, and their belongings, by river and lake, to their final destination.

The party left York Factory early in July, 1812. Up Hayes River, up the whole length of Lake Winnipeg they travelled, and then in August, after many portages and treacherous rapids, the boats ascended the muddy current of the Red River, flowing through what is now known as Manitoba. For the first time, the people saw their promised land! Through the trees fringing

the river broken glimpses could be had of the prairie, a vast, gently billowing sea of green, washed in sunlight and fragrant air, stretching as far as the eye could see to where the sky stoops down to meet the earth.

At last their *bateaux* were drawn up St. Andrew's Rapids, where the locks are now situated, while Indians, from the vicinity of the Fort, regarded with wonder these white-faced new-comers, who had crossed the "great waters to dig gardens and work lands."

The Selkirk settlers arrived at Fort Douglas, so called after the family name of the earl, and the site of the present city of Winnipeg, on August 30th, 1812. Scarcely had they taken stock of their new surroundings, when they were chilled to the marrow with terror. Towards them, riding swiftly on horseback, came a formidable looking troop, decked in all the war accoutrements of the Indian, spreading feathers, dangling tomahawk, each wearing a thick, terrifying

coat of war paint. To the new-comers it was a never-to-be-forgotten spectacle! But when the riders came within close range, shouting and gesticulating as they came, it was seen that they wore borrowed apparel, and that they were a band of Metis or Half-breeds, aping the manners of their mothers' people. Their speech was a medley of French and Indian dialects, and their object was to tell Lord Selkirk's party that settlers were not wanted on the Red River, that it was the country of the fur trader, and that settlers must go farther afield.

Governor Miles Macdonell, of the Hudson's Bay Company, planned a ceremony for the official inauguration of Lord Selkirk's Colony. At the appointed hour on September 24th, several traders from Fort Gibraltar, the North West post, together with a few French-Canadians and Indians, put in an appearance. In the presence of this odd company, Macdonell read Lord Selkirk's patent to Assiniboia. About him

were drawn a guard of honour, and overhead the British Ensign floated in the breeze. Six small swivel guns, which had been brought with the colonists, belched forth a salute to mark the occasion. The 'Nor'-Westers were visibly impressed by this show of authority and power.

Much might be written of the colonists' first year in this new country. We know something of the joys and sorrows of these early years, of the sufferings and the splendid fortitude of these early settlers; how the rude Plain Rangers conveyed them to the buffalo hunt in their wildly creaking Red River carts; or how, on loaded ponies, many a young Highlander came to grief in the wild stampede of his first buffalo hunt! Many a happy winter night was passed in dancing wild Indian jigs, to the stirring skirl of the Highland pipes, or the sawing and scraping of some French fiddler.

When spring opened, ten-acre lots were assigned to each settler, close to the Fort, at

what were known as the Colony Gardens, and one hundred-acre farms farther down the river. The North West Company were envious of, and feared this hardy, enterprising Scottish settlement, and did their best to destroy the colony. They almost succeeded. The instructions given to their chief were, that "Selkirk must be driven to abandon his project at any cost, for his colony would prove destructive to our fur trade."

Selkirk replied in kind. He wrote the Governor of his colony that, "The North West Company must be compelled to quit my lands. If they refuse they must be treated as poachers." Selkirk believed that the vast territory granted to him was legally his own property, as much as his parks in Scotland. He believed that he possessed the same right to expel intruders on this territory, as to drive poachers form his own Scotch estates. This was the spirit of Feudalism. The Nor'-Westers, on the other hand, claimed that

the charter of the Hudson's Bay Company did not apply beyond the bounds of Hudson Bay. Even if it did hold good beyond those limits, they pointed out that, by the terms of the charter, it applied only to lands not possessed by any other Christian power. And who would dispute that French fur traders and their successors, the Nor'-Westers, had ascended the streams of the interior long before the Hudson's Bay Company men? This was the spirit of Democracy. It needed no prophet to foresee that, when these claims met, there would be a violent clash.

At this point it would be well to note the difference between the leading rival companies, the Hudson's Bay factors, and those of the North West Company, in their method of trading with the Indians. It was the custom of the Hudson's Bay men to trade with the Indians through a window, and to discourage all friendly relations between them and the white men at the Post. The

Governor even beat one man with his cane for going into an Indian tent to light his pipe! On the other hand, the traders of the North West Company went freely amongst the Indians, making lavish use of rum and spirits. The result of this difference in treatment was that the latter took out many more furs than their rivals.

The thrilling story of each year, with its plot and counterplot, would fill a large volume. In spite of Nor'-Westers' threats, in spite of the fact that there would be no market for the colonists when they had succeeded in transforming the prairie wilderness into farms, Selkirk's "mad" dream of Empire seemed about to be realized. It had long been his wish to visit this colony, and in 1815 he arrived in Montreal with Lady Selkirk. The winter of 1815-16 had been a disastrous one for the settlers. The North West Company had nearly succeeded in wiping out the little colony. McLeod, of the Hudson's Bay Company, states (in his jour-

nal) that all the colonists' houses were destroyed by fire. Homeless, wounded, and in extreme distress they took to the boats, and saving what they could, started for Norway House, declaring they would never return.

Robert Semple brought out a new party to the colony to succeed these, but in June, 1816, Governor Semple and a party of twenty-one men were massacred by half-breeds at Seven Oaks, a spot marked by a stone monument just three miles north of the present City Hall, Winnipeg.

The Senior Officer of the North West Company now took up his residence in the late Governor Semple's apartments, and tried by every means to win over the Indians from their loyalty to the settlers. He addressed the Salteaux tribe, but Pequis, their chief, listened in stony silence, refusing to be moved from his allegiance, for he had been a friend of Governor Semple's. To mark his lasting friendship for the Selkirk

settlers, a statue has recently been erected to Chief Pequis in Kildonan Park, Winnipeg.

Lord Selkirk arrived at Fort William soon after the massacre and immediately took drastic measures. Acting as a Justice of the Peace, he held a court in which the Nor'-Westers, represented by William McGillivray, their western chief, were tried for their alleged crimes against the Selkirk settlers, which had culminated in the tragedy at Seven Oaks. Before the day was over, Selkirk had sufficient evidence, as he thought, to justify legal actions against certain parties, partners of the North West Company at Fort William. McGillivray was first arrested, and then the remaining partners at Fort William. These men were sent east for trial. Selkirk now proceeded on his way to the western settlement. He left Fort William on May 1st, and after an uneventful journey by canoe, he reached Fort Douglas at the end of June.

His thoughts must indeed have been sad on first nearing the ground for which so much blood had been shed, and for which he himself was to suffer so much. One may venture to say that in his most daring dreams, Selkirk never imagined the extent to which this part of the Empire was to grow from the seed he had planted. At Fort Douglas he was met by the colonists in council, and greeted by them as their friend and protector. During the following weeks he put the colony on a proper organized footing, even to the extent of planning for an experimental farm. While in the West Lord Selkirk fully gained the respect and loyalty of the Indians, and as a token of their admiration they bestowed upon him the title of "The Silver Chief."

Selkirk was anxious to acquire the ancient title which the Indians held to the lands of Assiniboia, in order to prevent future disputes. To effect this he brought together

at Fort Douglas a body of chiefs who represented the Cree and Salteaux nations. The Indian chiefs made eloquent speeches. They said that they were willing to surrender their claim to a strip of land, two miles in width, on either side of the Red River, from the mouth to the Red Lake River (now Grand Forks, North Dakota), and on either side of the Assiniboine as far as its junction with the Muskrat. This was measured by seeing how much land could be seen under a horse's belly towards the horizon. At Fort Douglas, Fort Daer, and at the junction of the Red and Red Lake Rivers, Selkirk secured about six miles on either side of the river. A peaceful treaty was concluded and the usual presents distributed. In signing the treaty, several chiefs drew odd pictures of animals on a rough map of the territory in question. These animals were their respective totems, and were placed opposite the region over which they claimed territory. It was stipu-

lated that one hundred pounds of good tobacco should be given annually to each nation as a special gift.

One sunny day in August, 1817, Selkirk gathered his settlers about him and said: "The parish shall be Kildonan; here you shall build your church, and that lot (indicating a piece of ground) is for a school." In September he left the colony, and travelled south by way of the United States. Upon arriving in the East he found himself pursued by officers of the law, and immediately legal proceedings began. These were carried on for a long time by both parties. The trials were both tiresome and very disheartening to Selkirk. Money was spent without stint, and much influence brought to bear by the North West Company to fight Selkirk's charges. These charges, which included burglary, arson, robbery and murder, were not proven, and Selkirk had to pay large amounts of money in fines and costs. Failing health now compelled him to leave

Canada, with his wife and family, for England. Recovered in health he contemplated further legal action against the North West Company, but again he became very ill. He went to Pau, in the south of France, where he lived but a short time, and died in 1820, being buried under the shadows of the Pyrenees.

It is an interesting coincidence that Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Lord Selkirk, to both of whom we owe so much for opening up the great western country, died the same year, the former on March 12th, and the latter on April 8th.

The Hudson's Bay Company shortly afterwards bought back the rights that lay in Canada, and that Company and the North West Company were united in 1821. This union of the rival Companies was a prophecy of that peace on the plains, out of which was to develop the final act in the Federation of the Dominion of Canada.

Lord Selkirk's name will always remain



inseparably connected with the western country. He was generous with his wealth, and lavish with his love for mankind. His emigration enterprise cost him over half a million dollars. All his schemes were philanthropic. He aimed to help others by assisting them to help themselves, to improve living conditions, and to leave this world a better place. To show how Selkirk had lavished his money on this scheme, we find, after his death, the Selkirk estates were encumbered with a debt of £160,000, and that his account with his financial agents in Montreal was overdrawn to the extent of more than £10,000.

Half a century after Selkirk's death the British Government began to see the promise in the West! Half a century later the Canadian provinces were convinced of the necessity of extending the boundaries of the Dominion to the Pacific.

Consider, for a moment, the settlement that Selkirk established. It may be claimed

that he followed in the path of the great explorers, but that he made no fresh discoveries. He undertook to colonize territory already in the possession of others, all of it well known. His settlement dwindled almost to the vanishing point, and never at any time was an important factor in trade. Some even assert that he was, in spite of his kindness and generosity, unreasonable and, on occasion, unscrupulous. However that may be, his name has become a tradition in Canada. Those pioneer struggles have left something priceless in the blood of the race, that makes for national greatness and character. Heroism leaves nothing insignificant that it touches! And so it happens that these humble immigrants, although a century has rolled between them and us, today take their place among the imperishable names on our nation's Roll of Honour!

Recall, again, their means of communication, and compare them with ours. Time has wrought miracles! The express canoes

of the brigade of York boats once furnished a most picturesque spectacle. The voyageurs, with their brightly coloured shirts, proud feathers, and gay, streaming ribbons, then dipped their glittering paddles in the Red River, to the tune of old French river-songs. These have passed; and in their place the swift river steamer ploughs the waters. Transcontinental trains roar along, waking echoes among the historic old trails. Overhead, against the sun, hums an aeroplane, disputing the kingdom of the eagle. Telegraph and telephone usurp the packet of the *coureur*, while the air throbs with melody and is electric with news, flashed from radios below the horizon!

Let us look once again at the little hamlet, a mere trading post, in a vast plain midway between the Atlantic and the Pacific, struggling feebly for its existence. Then think of Winnipeg, proud city of the plains, rearing its great buildings on the spot where, for long years, the Red River colony battled

savages, loneliness, and obstacles enough to break the hearts of all but heroes. All honour to the dauntless men and brave women of the Selkirk settlement!

Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, so splendidly endowed with lofty dreams, and brotherly love, was the inspiration of those early pioneers, who well and truly laid the foundation of a new country. The body of Lord Selkirk sleeps with his forbears, but his brave spirit walks the ramparts of his dreams in The Empire on the Plains!

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